

The Character and Effects of Christian Love :

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A SERMON,

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF

MRS. MARTHA WILLIAMS,

WHO DIED MARCH 11, 1815.

BY LUTHER WILLSON,

ONE OF THE PASTORS OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN BROOKLYN.

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A SERMON.

JOHN xv. 12.

This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you.

THE words I have read, containing the instruction of our Saviour to his intimate companions and friends, are recommended to our serious and respectful attention by one,* who, a few days since, took leave of her worthy connexions for that world, whence there is no return.—These words, at first spoken by a messenger from Heaven, and afterwards recorded by the beloved disciple of our Lord, are now reiterated from the grave, to awaken our sensibility, and inspire us with those benevolent principles, which are the bond of civil and social relations, the life and happiness of the soul.

By this monition of our aged† and departed friend, *she, being dead, yet speaketh.* We are to regard it as

* Mrs. MARTHA WILLIAMS, who expressed a wish before her death that a discourse might be delivered at her funeral from the above passage in John.

† Mrs. WILLIAMS, when she died, was in her 81st year.

a solemn testimony of respect to our holy religion;* a religion well intended and adapted to enforce the purest motives and the most generous sentiments of the heart. It contains her last affectionate advice to her kindred that she has left behind, and the whole circle of her acquaintance, with whom she was associated by the tenderest ties. It should therefore be received as an impressive memento of parental concern for the peace and happiness of her family connexions, and will, no doubt, be retained in the affectionate remembrance of a grateful posterity.

The sacred precept proposed by our deceased friend, for our reflection and improvement after her exit from the world, would lead us, according to its original design, to contemplate that principle of love, which exists between the friends and disciples of our Lord, in conformity to the example which he had set before them, as a perfect model for imitation. But, as it is believed, that this precept was recommended to our attention, with a view to enforce the disposition of friendship and kindness between branches of the same family, and the duty of love and kindness to all; I shall endeavour to place before you the character and effects of Christian love, considered as a general principle, embracing all the particular virtues of an amiable and useful life.

Love is an animating and active principle; and when

* Mrs. WILLIAMS had never made a publick profession of her Christian faith, though all her hope of a future and better life was founded upon the mediation of Christ, and the promises of the gospel. She appeared to have an impressive view of the value and excellence of the Christian religion; yet she felt her imperfections so much as to distrust her proper qualifications for the communion of the saints.

directed towards proper objects, and originating from proper motives, it is *the bond of perfection, the end of the commandment*. Viewing it in this scriptural light, and as it was richly and divinely displayed in the character of our Lord, the great exemplar of our holy religion, we consider it a primary and essential virtue, exhibited in all those amiable and engaging qualities, which come within the province, and prompt to the duties of active benevolence.

As it exists in the enlightened and spiritual mind, it dwells with pleasure upon the unrivalled goodness of the great Parent and Benefactor of man. Upon such an object, the benevolent mind delights to dwell. The soul is filled with the noblest satisfaction, as it enjoys the pleasing exercises of a pious and grateful heart, as it converses with that invisible Power, that sustains and animates the whole system of nature, that enriches and adorns the universe. As it contemplates, it admires; as it admires, it imitates; and as it imitates, it feels a superiour pleasure, in being an example of that benevolence to man which accords with the goodness and mercy of Heaven.

The principle of love, in order to secure the practical observance of all moral duties, must be founded in a conscious responsibility to the God of Love. In the wide expansion of its unlimited views, it takes pleasure in universal happiness, and ultimately centres in the supreme fountain of happiness and life. Thus it maintains a pious and intimate correspondence with the spiritual

world, and feels all the motives of truth, rectitude and goodness in its intercourse with man.

Love is an elevated and practical principle. He who knows by experience its humane disposition and amiable effects, feels himself associated with a vast multitude of beings, composing the human family, who have the same desires, the same infirmities, and the same wants with himself; whose happiness he considers it his duty as well as pleasure, as far as he is able, to seek and promote. His heart expands with a generous desire, a feeling solicitude for the comfort and welfare of the human race. If he has experienced the instability of fortune, been elated with success and fair prospects, and depressed with disappointment, he cannot fail to sympathize and *rejoice with them that rejoice, and to weep with them that weep*. He enters into the views and feelings of the happiest and most miserable of our species, and makes *their* interest, *their* joys and sorrows his *own*. Gladly would he make the greatest sacrifices to alleviate the wants and distresses of the unfortunate, could he but expect that his sacrifices and wishes would be successful. The noble disposition of his heart makes him unhappy, because he sees others less happy than himself.

As he discovers, in the dispensations of Providence, a great diversity in the condition of mankind, he often wonders at the apparent unequal distribution; and many times, perhaps, from momentary indiscretion, and the limited capacity of his views, may be led almost to dis-

trust the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. But soon he discovers his mistake. The variety of conditions to be seen in human life, he discovers, upon farther consideration, to be the effect of wisdom, designed to bring into exercise the moral character of man; and is therefore convinced, beyond a reasonable doubt, that all things are tending to a glorious and happy issue in the government of God. If the rank, and power, and happiness of all men were in all respects equal, there would be no room for the display of moral virtue. If there were no poor, dependent and miserable, how could the good man have opportunity to display the generosity of his soul in deeds of kindness and beneficence? If there was no room for the conferring of favours, arising from the different conditions of opulence and want, how could we discover the godlike virtue of charity, and the affectionate return of a grateful heart? Were there no trials to be endured, where would be the evidence of our patience, fortitude and submission to the will of Heaven? virtues in this world, truly Christian, difficult, and ennobling to the human character.

Whatever perplexities may arise from the variety of conditions to be met with in the world, he, who feels the influence of love, acquiesces and rejoices in the wisdom of a Superiour Power, and endeavours to alleviate as much suffering, and to be instrumental in promoting as much pleasure and enjoyment as comes within the reach of his influence and ability. He goes out of the narrow circle of private interest and personal gratifica-

tion, and with the most enlarged and benevolent views, “freely expatiates o’er all this scene of man.”

A diversity of rank and condition in the associations of civil society, appears to have been designed by Him who manages the affairs of the world; and, indeed, seems in a degree necessary for the exercise and display of the Christian and moral virtues. To this, therefore, a proper respect is to be observed. But benevolence most readily reduces all to such a state of equality, that it seeks and values the happiness of one as much as that of another. Though it has its limits of active usefulness, its desires are as unbounded as the creatures and universe of God.

The principle of which we speak, inclines us also to a just estimate of comparative relations; and especially of those things in which character essentially consists. It leads us to determine the worth of character, not from distinctions of rank, or wealth, or power, any further than these advantages are improved as the means of a useful life. The visible splendour of a superiour station has no charms to excite its admiration any farther than it is accompanied with real, intrinsick excellence and worth. Poverty, when accompanied with the amiableness of Christian virtue, will ever command a higher place in the complacence and esteem of the benevolent mind, than the most dazzling splendour of outward distinctions, where virtue and generosity are wanting. The heart full of benevolence, ever regards those with the greatest affection and esteem who best fulfil the duties of their station.

The following observation of the wise man, serious and full of meaning, should furnish an irresistible motive to all, to remember each other, and treat each other kindly and affectionately as brethren : *The rich and poor meet together ; the Lord is the Maker of them all.* All are endued with the same faculties and passions ; they have the same hopes and fears, the same relish for happiness, the same sense of injuries, and the same resentments. With respect to their final destination, they stand in the same relation to God, the Judge of all.— They are appointed to the same diseases and the same end ; and, if they are equally pious and virtuous in proportion to their capacity and means of improvement, they will at last receive an equal reward of uninterrupted felicity in the kingdom of God.

To whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required. The man, who has little given, and makes a good improvement of the little he has, is as worthy of esteem, when his virtues merely are considered, as the one who receives much, and is useful in proportion to what he receives. Whatever respect is due to those who hold a place in the superiour walks of life, the disposition of love is ever attentive to the condition of such as are destined to occupy an inferiour place ; and it regards them with equal kindness and affection.

Every one has a right to choose his particular friends and associates for his own pleasure and improvement, without affording any just occasion of offence. But love, let it be remembered, whatever may be its claims in this

respect, maintains a just and generous deportment and intercourse with all. It feels a deep-rooted aversion to every appearance of avarice and ostentation, while it cordially embraces that goodness which is generous and diffusive ; kind, merciful and beneficent.

The good man, so far as he is unbiassed by the powerful excitement of self-interest, despises a mercenary and ungenerous disposition even in himself. As soon as he discovers it rising in his heart, he sees, and hates, and suppresses it with a feeling and becoming indignation.

But allow me to observe, that the principle I have been describing, after all, looks candidly upon the errors and frailties of human nature. It is ever disposed to excuse and extenuate the faults of others as far as may be consistent with rectitude, and a proper regard for the publick good. It is never inclined to magnify the defects and vices even of the wicked, and especially, the imperfections of those who aim at what is right and good. On the contrary, it awakens in the soul a noble and generous sympathy, that willingly seeks to overlook and conceal them, rather than expose them to publick view. And where it discovers in the same person particular vices, associated with many virtues, it never speaks reproachfully of the one, without bestowing a just commendation upon the other.

Farther, it is the aim of benevolence, to estimate with fairness, the various opinions and conduct upon which character depends. The benevolent heart is uniformly

opposed to a rash and uncandid decision. When it observes the different sentiments and views of men upon subjects of importance, it makes a suitable allowance for the means of information, the influence of education and custom, and for all circumstances that may be supposed to have an effect in forming the judgment. It considers the different attitude in which the same object may be presented to the mind, or the different medium through which it may be seen. For this reason, it is careful to withhold a decision upon any subject of importance, until every thing necessary to a fair result is deliberately weighed. We know not what allowance to make for the particular circumstances and process of reasoning, by which even an erroneous opinion is formed, and which, perhaps, might have led *us* to the same conclusion. We should, therefore, be disposed to look upon ourselves as fallible like others, and from this consideration, should never determine with respect to the character of any, merely from a knowledge of their particular opinions.

How often do we find men, whose views we believe to be erroneous, yet whose characters are covered with integrity and virtue as with a shield. This fact, which I believe to be confirmed by general observation, should lead us to be candid and cautious in pronouncing sentence against any on account of supposed errors.

The principle we have been considering, the love that corresponds with the temper and genius of the gospel, is a noble disposition. "It is that generous expansion of

mind, which enables us to look beyond all petty distinctions of party and system, and in the estimate of men and things, to rise superiour to narrow prejudices." He who feels its motives and enlivening power, studies the means by which he may be able, most successfully, to promote the essential interest and happiness of such as are in a situation to be benefitted by his favour. He esteems it his glory as well as duty, to exhibit to the rising generation and to the world, a fair example of piety to God, friendship to the Redeemer, and good-will to man, that they seeing his good works, may glorify their Father who is in Heaven; that his children and posterity, by the history and recollection of his virtues, may rise up and call him blessed.

Love is the grand principle, that unites in one, the virtuous, intelligent and moral universe of God. When one part rejoices, the rest rejoice with it; and when one part suffers, the rest suffer with it. By a beautiful, rhetorical figure, this principle frequently puts on the charms of personal attraction, and is recommended to us under the name of Charity.

Charity is kind; seeketh not her own.

The offspring of Heaven, she condescends to make her abode with the sons of men. Free from ostentation, affectionate and meek, she raises her eye to Heaven, contemplating, with exalted delight, the pure and blissful regions, where, at length, she hopes to return, and forever to dwell. While on earth, she delights to

mingle her joys with the cheerful and contented, and to sooth the anguish of the afflicted soul. She feels a tender concern for the unfortunate, and visits, with a feeling solicitude, the habitations of indigence and disease. Are any gloomy and disconsolate, it is her pleasure to drive away their melancholy cares, and to revive their drooping spirits. Often is it in her power to raise the sinking soul, and to inspire those with courage and hope that were languishing and ready to die. She weeps over the misfortunes of the miserable, and kindly interposes to save them from evils that they imagine, or troubles that they feel. Bearing a part with the joys and sorrows of her companions on earth, she casts around an exploring eye, and collects into a mingled group all those images of distress that she desires or hopes to relieve. Her best prayers and exertions are employed for their consolation and relief, and the last mite, that can prudently be spared, she cheerfully bestows. Such is the character of this offspring of Heaven, which visits us with her cheering smiles, and comforts us in this house of our pilgrimage.

Charity has a particular respect to the needy and dependent. She goes to the house of want with a heart full and flowing, and with a hand as liberal as her heart is full; and the man who has chosen her for his intimate companion, has a treasure, in comparison with all others, the most precious and productive. It is the pleasure of doing good; the reward of friendship and

esteem in this life,* together with a full recompense in that world, where all good dispositions and good works will be perpetuated in everlasting remembrance.†

The love that the Gospel inculcates and inspires (let it not be forgotten) is a divine, habitual and generous principle of the heart. Without it, the best sympathies of our nature are but a fickle and momentary impulse. It is candid, and therefore judges without prejudice. Unsuspecting and free from envy, it rejoices in human happiness. Fair and honourable, it puts the most favourable construction upon motives and conduct. It is, in short, a complete assemblage of all the virtues, exhibited in the most amiable and attractive form.

To cultivate the humane and social affections ; to im-

* Attend to what Job says of himself: "The young men saw me and hid themselves; and the aged arose and stood up. When the ear heard me then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me it gave witness to me; because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy." Thus it is, that deeds of charity cannot fail to attract universal admiration, and to excite friendship and gratitude in the hearts of those who are sensible of the benefits received.

† "The charitable man needs not fear a deprivation of his fortune, for in this respect he does not die. He hath prevented the ravages of death by disburdening himself of his riches. He hath eradicated the love of the world. He hath given to the poor what would otherwise have fed avarice. He does not impoverish himself by his benevolence, he hath sent his fortune before him. At death, the Christian beholds the friends that he has made of the mammon of unrighteousness opening their arms to receive him. I recollect here an epitaph said to be engraven on the tomb of Atolus of Rheims: *He exported his fortune before him into Heaven by his charities; he is gone thither to enjoy it.* Happy he, that has a right to such an epitaph. Happy he, whose funeral oration is spoken by the wretched in sobs and sighs, and expressions like these: I was naked and he clothed me, I was hungry and he fed me, I lived a dying life, and he was the instrument of Providence to support me!"

prove and adorn the connexions of civil life ; to soften the asperity of the human mind, the spirit of rigour and intolerance ; to break down the partition of prejudice and selfish attachments ; to take the law of purity and honour as the guide of human life, maintaining it with inflexible fidelity ; to be susceptible of every generous motive and disinterested act, that comes within the province of strict integrity and active benevolence, is ever worthy of that divine principle, which is recommended to us as *the end of the commandment, the bond of perfection.*

The individual who is conscious that the love, which the Gospel inspires, glows within his breast ; that his views are enlarged, his motives pure, and his affections expanded and drawn forth in disinterested acts to his fellow-creatures, must be pronounced virtuous and happy in a superiour degree. While the heart of avarice congeals and freezes, and can never be so dissolved as to flow out in deeds of humanity and goodness, he takes a supreme pleasure in doing good. For it is the nature of love to make men happy ; both those who feel its exciting influence within themselves, and those who are the objects of it. And what pleasure can be compared with that which is derived from friendship and benevolence, displayed in mutual acts of kindness throughout the family of man.

“ Love is the most pure and divine principle that ever warmed the heart of man, and is the bond of union in every happy society.” It is the comprehensive term

that brings before us in one glorious view the character of God. *God is love.* His love is displayed to us in the intellectual and moral powers, as well as the social affections of our nature, and in all those means of active goodness, which flow to us from the fullness of His mercy and grace. From these considerations of goodness in the Author of our being, we have the strongest inducement to co-operate with His benevolent designs, in diffusing happiness according to the sphere in which His Providence has appointed us to move.

We have also an example of disinterested goodness in the benevolent Author of our religion, which it would be unworthy of us not to contemplate with a desire of imitation.

Who ever exhibited such condescension, such dignity, such generosity and greatness of soul as the man Christ Jesus, who laid down his life for the redemption of a world! Who ever delivered such a multitude from captivity, and conferred such rich and glorious gifts! What hero ever exhibited such patience and magnanimity in the midst of such peculiar sufferings! And all this for what? To prove to mankind the unlimited extent of His love; to give light to them that sat in darkness, and to ameliorate the condition of our race; to open before them the door of hope, and the felicities of immortal life.

“ Go, imitate the grace divine,
The grace that blazes like a sun,
Hold forth your fair, though feeble light;
Through all your lives let mercy run.”

And here let us give our attention to some excellent advice of St. Paul, which is fairly comprehended in the great duty of Christian benevolence, and which tends to enforce it, in a various, particular and practical view.

Let love be without dissimulation. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love ; rejoicing in hope, given to hospitality. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all. If thine enemy hunger, feed him ; if he thirst, give him drink. Be not overcome of evil ; but overcome evil with good.

“ Every part of the Christian religion inculcates generosity” and love. “ Christianity gives us a character of God, but, my God ! what a character does it give ! GOD IS LOVE. Christianity teaches the doctrine of Providence ; but what a Providence ! *Upon whom doth not its light arise !* Is there an animalcule so little, or a wretch so forlorn, as to be forgotten of his God ? Christianity teaches the doctrine of redemption ; but the redemption of whom ? Of all tongues, kindred, nations, and people ; of the infant of a span, and the sinner of an hundred years old ; a redemption generous in its principles, generous in its price, generous in its effects : fixed sentiments of divine munificence, and revealed with a liberality for which we have no name.

“ A generous Christian goes out of his own party,

associates with others, and gains improvement by all. It is a Persian proverb, *a liberal hand is better than a strong arm*. The dignity of Christianity is better supported by acts of benevolence than by accuracy of reasoning; but when both go together, when a man of sentiment can clearly state and ably defend his religious principles, and when his heart is generous as his principles are inflexible, he possesses strength and beauty in an eminent degree."

As long as Christianity stands upon the immovable basis of truth and mercy revealed from Heaven, so long the truly benevolent man shall stand in all the dignity of a Christian, esteemed and loved as a benefactor, a partaker of *riches and honour and life*; durable riches, everlasting honours, and life eternal in the kingdom of God.

Thus, my hearers, I have endeavoured to illustrate the character and effects of Christian love.

But here you will suffer me to remind you more particularly, that the love of which we speak is not a principle that is transient in its effects, a mere flow of sympathy, that languishes and dies away with the particular circumstances that produce it; that is limited and partial in its views, or distinguished by an excess and extravagance of feeling. It is something more. It is the sum and substance of true religion; the source of all the virtues that adorn the most elevated and humble stations in life. It is fixed and habitual, extending to every object that requires its friendly aid, and ren-

dering exact justice to all, without respect to persons.

In this view of love, considered as comprehending the essential virtues of a useful life, it gives a settled dignity and worth to our being, and is ever contemplated with pleasure by those who aim at the improvement and perfection of their nature.

We are all, I think, persuaded, that an established and well-regulated principle of action, as it respects the purposes of life, is the only foundation on which it is safe to rest the destiny and happiness of man. Any thing short of this, leaves the human character unsettled and indeterminate, reducing it below that rank which every wise man feels it his duty to sustain with honour to himself, and as an example to others. A man without fixed sentiments of rectitude and goodness, however exquisite his sensibilities, exalted his genius, accomplished his education, or engaging his deportment, must, after all, be deficient in a wise consistency and uniformity of conduct. The splendour of his talents and speciousness of his virtues may captivate and allure, but, unless his character is supported by conscious integrity, solid worth, and practical wisdom, the partiality of prejudice will bias his judgment, the fluctuating influence of popular opinion will prevail against the decisions of conscience, and unsettle the rectitude of the heart. So important is it that the principle we have been recommending, be uniform and constant in its effects. And you will also understand, that

with a view to its *full* effect upon those who are friends to virtue, and are inclined to imitation, it must be displayed in a fair example.

Every worthy example, whether it appear in a personal or associated capacity, excites in the mind of the observer an habitual veneration for what is morally good and excellent. The best maxims are not likely to have any great effect, unless they are enforced by an engaging and correspondent behaviour. We are always moved and delighted when any thing pleasing is actually presented to our view. Living examples of superiour worth have an irresistible control over our minds and affections. We know the cause by the effect. When we observe the actions of a man, marked with reverence for the Supreme Being, affection for his friends, forgiveness to his enemies, truth and justice and kindness in his intercourse with the world, the conclusion is natural and unavoidable, that his mind is a perfect likeness of wisdom, purity and love.

How pleasing to behold the perfection of that example which inspires the virtuous with ambition to imitate, and extends its happy influence through all the region where it may be seen.

Thus, my brethren, as I have before observed, it has been my object to place before you, with considerable precision, the true character of Christian love; and particularly the worth of an example corresponding to its disposition and benevolent designs.

A principle which is so general, and contains so

much, you could not expect me, within the ordinary limits of a discourse, to illustrate in all its branches and varied application ; but only so far as to fix your attention upon its wise and benevolent designs, its general utility, and the necessity of uniformly adhering to its sacred rules.

And in view of our subject, what excellent advice is left us by our departed friend. The kind admonition in our text, *to love one another*, comes to us with a peculiar solemnity. It is the precept of our Lord to his disciples, recommended by the purity and perfection of his life. It is the precept of one who felt, in her departing moments, a tender concern for her family and acquaintance, and who was distinguished as a bright example of that love which she recommended to others. What could she have left us more worthy of respect and remembrance than her example and affectionate advice ?

I shall now direct my attention to those who mourn the loss of a beloved parent.

Though a stranger to most of you, I trust you will consider me as feeling a proper concern for your prosperity, your best and immortal interest. The love that I have described requires me to feel this.

I am entrusted with a solemn message from a friend whom you greatly respected and loved, who, we hope, is now receiving in Heaven the reward of her labours and kindness upon earth. It is therefore my duty, as well as pleasure, to obey.

The message I am to deliver in the form of an address, is the precept of our Lord to his disciples. It is the precept of a *mother* to her *children*. I need not repeat it, you know it already ; it is familiar to your thoughts ; you have seen it illustrated in her unwearied attention to the comfort and happiness of her family, and to the exigencies of the children of want. By the uniform testimony of her acquaintance, she possessed all the sensibilities of a tender and benevolent heart ; and her kindness was not confined to the circle of friends ; it extended to all the instances of suffering humanity, that occurred within the limits of her observation and ability to relieve.

You will not expect me to enter upon a particular description of her virtues, her patience, fortitude and susceptibility of the most generous motives ; you all know them better than I can describe them. They are, I trust, written in your hearts, where fond recollection will delight to dwell upon them with gratitude and filial love ; and as a motive to obey the command, *love one another as I have loved you*. Disconnected and distant as you are from each other by local situation, may your views and hearts be one, ever united by the tender sympathies of natural affection, and the more perfect bonds of Christian love.

The memory of a mother will ever be dear to you, and worthy of respect, from the interest that she felt in the peace and prosperity of her descendants ; and from the example that she has left us, as a friend to humanity

and religion. While you mourn her loss with feelings of tenderness and filial attachment, you have reason to be thankful that she lived so long, and that her last days were attended with comfort and hope.

May the voice that speaks to you from the grave be cheerfully obeyed, and you all enjoy, to your great satisfaction, the pleasures of that religion which consists in love ; love to the Supreme and Universal Parent, love to the Redeemer, love to one another as members and branches of the same family, and love to all who bear the image and possess the feelings of our common nature.

May peace and happiness attend you in all the walks of life, and finally accompany you to those seats of bliss,

“ Where joy like morning dew distils,

“ And all the air is love.”

